TO KNOW GOD: THE TRINITY
John 14:8-17, 25, 26
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Today's scripture lesson contains what the great Scottish teacher Arthur John Gossip called the most staggering saying in literature. Jesus had been teaching his disciples and telling them that soon he would be taken away from them. He was emphasizing God's constant love and pointing out that God's care for them would continue even when he was gone.

Right in the midst of this, Philip breaks in, asking the age-old question: Is there really such a God? How can we get to know him? "Show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied."

It was a natural question, and yet Jesus' answer shows he was taken aback: "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip?" And then with infinite patience, Jesus answered Philip's question: "He who has seen me has seen the Father."

That is surely the most staggering saying in all history. There sat that insignificant figure from the backwoods, a cheap cloak, work-roughened hands, calmly making that astounding claim as if it were too self-evident to require proof. It is a statement which must be utterly true or else it is blasphemy. In fact, the witness of twenty centuries of history and of half the present world demonstrates the truth of his outrageous claim.

Our own attitudes are a case in point. As children and, hopefully, continuing as adults, the more we study and learn about Jesus, his life and his teaching, the more our idea of what God is becomes like what we know of Jesus. The further we go, the more we cannot think of God except in terms of Christ.

Christians since the very first days thought the same way, realizing the extremely close connection between Jesus and God. The earliest New Testament writings display that very faith. But it remained for the Gospel of John, one of the later books of the New Testament, to give first expression to this faith in a new way. That gospel, more than any other part of the Bible, sets forth the basic belief we refer to as the Doctrine of the Trinity.

A few words of explanation about this subject: A couple of weeks ago on two consecutive days, I found myself drawn into conversations with people who complained about the whole idea of God as Trinity. I tried briefly to clear up some misunderstandings. Obviously, I wasn't completely successful because both conversations ended with the request for a sermon on the subject some day. Well, as it happens the ancient name for this portion of the church year is the Season of the Trinity. So why not now?

A second comment: Any historical treatment of this doctrine necessarily involves us in sexist language. The traditional trinitarian titles are Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Until recent years it was all unthinkingly masculine. And, wrongly, only masculine. The unconscious cultural bias of Bible translators conflicted with

I wish I had a sword in my hand, for then I would kill you." And the ass said to Balaam, "Am I not your ass, upon which you have ridden all your life long to this day? Was I ever accustomed to do so to you?" and he said, "No." Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed his head, and fell on his face. And the angel of the Lord said to him, "Why have you struck your ass these three times? Behold, I have come forth to withstand you, because your way is perverse before me; and the ass saw me, and turned aside before me these three time. If she had not turned aside from me, surely just now I would have slain you and let her live." Then Balaam said to the angel of the Lord, "I have sinned, for I did not know that thou didst stand in the road against me. Now therefore, if it is evil in thy sight, I will go back again." And the angel of the Lord said to Balaam, "Go with the men; but only the word which I bid you, that shall you speak." So Balaam went on with the princes of Balak. (Numbers 22:21-35)

We have always been intrigued with the possibility of talking with the animals, and with the provocative suggestion that they might have something to tell us; that they might know something we do not know. The idea has always been there it seems: from Dr. Doolittle actually Talking to the Animals, to James Herriot's charming sheep and terriers; from attempts to understand whale songs and gorilla gestures to the harmless silliness of the old Mr. Ed television show, we have been intrigued with the possibility that if the animals could talk they might have quite a bit to say. I'm not much of a track fan, but each year at derby time I wonder if the thoroughbreds know they are in a race when the bell rings and the gates open at Churchill Downs, and what would they say in the winners circle. William Blake, that marvelously mysterious English artist/poet, wrote a strange poem which I have always found compelling:

Tiger! Tiger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare sieze the fire?

When the stars threw down their spears,
And watered heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the lamb make thee?

Who can look at one of those magnificent animals and not think like that? Frederick Beuchner writes: "As fascinating as a message from outer space would be a message from the inner space of a great blue heron or a common house cat sunning herself on the kitchen linoleum. Their mute gaze suggests a vision of reality beyond our imagining. What do they see in their ignorance that we in our wisdom are mostly blind to?" (Peculiar Treasures, p. 13)

Surely part of what we must learn from this story is that the creatures with whom we share the earth do us many favors: they feed, clothe, carry, work for, and astonish us with their beauty. And perhaps the small snail, the humpback whale, the mountain gorillas, the California condor - dwindling to a precious few as our civilization make life impossible - do see the elemental economy of things far more clearly than we do.

And then there was another fact. After Jesus was gone, his first followers were utterly convinced that somehow he was still with them. His divine presence seemed far more real than ever before. And this was unmistakably true in their secret meeting place — in that large room they used for prayer and fellowship in Jerusalem. In the midst of their fellowship they were persuaded that they had not lost, and never could lose, either God or Jesus. They experienced a new wave of power rushing into and through their lives. So, after the resurrection and at Pentecost they gained the third fact that God our Creator, who came near to us in Jesus, is with us now forevermore in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps it is this third article of the Trinity which causes us the most trouble — the Holy Spirit. I think it helps to see how the Gospel of John thought of the Holy Spirit.

The first followers of Jesus lived in a state of suspension after his crucifixion and resurrection. They expected him to return very shortly, heralding the day of judgment and the beginning of God's kingdom. And so they waited, looking for a physical and visible return of Christ. However, among them, people such as the author of John were expressing a deeper understanding of faith. They argued that Jesus had already returned and that his spirit now dwelled on earth in the hearts of men and women. Jesus had promised his disciples a substitute for himself, a Counselor, and this Counselor was working among them even then. This they knew as the Holy Spirit, and it was this that Jesus had referred to, his Spirit, when he had said he would be with them.

For John, the Holy Spirit is the alter ego of Christ. Just as Christ is one with the Creator, yet distinct, so the Holy Spirit is one with Christ and yet distinct. In John, the Holy Spirit's teaching develops and complements Jesus' teachings. John remembers Jesus as saying, "The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." The Holy Spirit cultivates the seeds of truth already sown by Jesus.

Samuel Johnson thought that we need more frequently to be reminded rather than to be informed. Think how often Christ's teachings speak to us but we don't hear, or we are preoccupied, or our consciences are insensitive, or we hear but conveniently forget. We need to be reminded. In this sense the Church at its best has embodied the Holy Spirit. By that I mean that the work of the Church in its broadest concern is a continuation, a reminder of the work of Christ himself, reminding us of his concern for humanity.

There is an analogy which helps me at this point. It may not carry all the depths of meaning involved in the Doctrine of the Trinity, but I think it does clarify.

Imagine with me a person who discovers a new idea. It begins with one experience, it is narrow, limited, but it grows in the person's thinking and expands in all directions until it encompasses much more than at first. For example, we are told Isaac Newton's first insight into the law of gravity came when he saw an apple fall from a tree. The first hint of X-rays came when Marie Curie figured something unusual was happening in the mineral called pitchblende. Both those small observations grew and expanded to encompass so much more.

And that always suggests to me that there is a dimension to all of us; a religious dimension, an imaginative, open-eyed, playful part which is terribly important for our own wholeness, but when everything about the life we live conspires to repress. "Unless you become like children," he said.

A decade or so ago a psychiatrist by the name of Harris gave us a whole new way to look at ourselves which we may find helpful. I'm OK/Your OK was the book title and in it Harris taught that each person has three separate personalities - or ego states: a parent, an adult, and a child. Most of us, Harris maintained, establish early in life that the child is "not OK" and spend the rest of life keeping it out of the limelight. Listen to how Harris described that child in us.

"In the child is a vast store of positive data. In the child reside creativity, curiosity, the desire to explore and know, the urges to touch and feel and experience and the recordings of the glorious, pristine feelings of first discoveries. In the child are recorded the countless, grand a-ha experiences, the firsts in the life of the small person..." (p. 27)

You see, it is there, in the child in us, Jesus understood, that the basic religious impulse is experienced. It is there, he understood, that you and I can experience the love of God. The parent in us is busy worrying about the fact that we might not deserve that love; the parent is occupied with the project of creating projects designed to earn God's love, and reasons to feel bad and guilty and unworthy. The adult in us, meanwhile, is busy posing very serious questions, academic, grown-up concerns, about the nature of the God whose love we are discussing. It is the child in us which is capable of being loved and of loving in response. Another way of saying that is the way Jesus said it. "Unless you become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of God." Still another way is to suggest, as that wise old story did, that sometimes the simple donkey can see an angel which the preoccupied religious adult is missing.

Christian baptism understands that, of course: understands that at the heart of the human story is a great mystery; whether you are dealing with semitic tribes, fighting their way into the promised land and being born as God's people in the process, or the actual breathtaking, stunning birth of an infant, at the heart of it is a great mystery. It is a mystery which will not be explained. The word "love" comes close. The sacramental act of cradling a child and placing water on a small head and saying words about love comes, for many of us, as close as we ever get to understanding it.

The ancient wisdom of the faith, expressed in a marvelous story about a talking donkey; expressed again when Jesus placed a child in the middle of his disciples and said "be like this," celebrated when we baptize our children, is perhaps best said in a simple petition... Bless them..Bless the beasts and the children...and bless us all. Amen.